

## The Beach House

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Summary: When Ranger is suddenly called away on official government business, the guys invite Steph to join them at their beach house for the weekend. What she finds when she arrives, though, is not the typical 'guy weekend' she had in mind.

## The Beach House

\_The other night, I watched Disney's Pocahontas for the first time in at least fifteen years. It used to be one of my favourites. I had great fun singing along (badly at times), and then suddenly this story came to me. I hope you like it.\_

**\*\*The Beach Hous\*\*\*\*e\*\***

My mother had always had high hopes for my life. Hopes that I would find a guy, settle down and pop out two-point-five babies. Hopes that I would live in a typical burg house, with my typical burg family, and a typical burg dog. That I would have a steady job â€" preferably, housewife. That I would bring my perfect, typical family to her house every Friday night for dinner. And most of all I wouldn't blow up cars.

Well, I can't guarantee all of that, but my life \_has\_ settled down a lot since the day I decided to become a Fugitive Apprehensive Agent. Not right away, of course. There were a few years were it looked like I would get myself killed before ever paying my rent on time. But after that, when I finally realised that I was stumbling about in the dark while the guys were all wearing night vision goggles and beckoning me toward them so they could help, things got better.

I started spending more time at Rangeman. In the gym with Lester, learning self-defence. In the gun range with Hank. In the office with Hal learning proper research techniques. With Tank in the field learning how being a huge-ass, bald, black man makes everything so much easier â€" I'm not entirely sure how that was helping me improve, but it definitely upped my capture rate. Hector was

attempting to load me down with tech, even though with the language barrier, I didn't understand anything he told me. All the of the guys were an integral part of training me to be the perfect bounty hunter, whether I saw them once a week, once a fortnight, once a month or once in a blue moon. And I now had the added benefit of being an official Rangeman employee.

Mom was satisfied that I had a steady pay check now, but was still sceptical about my chosen career path. She thought I should be putting my business degree to better use. I thought she should pull her nose out of my business a bit more. I mean, it's not like she was getting calls every other day that I'd blown up another car, or I'd been spotted running down Main Street with spaghetti in my hair. She should try being happy for me for a change. But the fact that she wasn't on my case about getting a real job made a real difference in our relationship. I no longer baulked at the thought of visiting weekly. It was a fact of life. Friday nights were dinner with my parents.

Thursday nights, on the other hand, were dinner with my guys â€" missions and criminal sightings permitting, of course. We met at Shorty's. It was glorious, smelling of pizza sauce and garlic. And best of all, when I walked through the door, there wasn't a single burg person.

I made my way through the crowded restaurant to the back corner and the table that was permanently reserved for Rangeman. Lester, Bobby, Tank and Ranger were already there, deep in discussion. Probably business related. As I approached the table, Ranger stood so that I could slip into the booth between Tank and himself. Tank probably didn't think it was fair that he should have to share with two people on his side, given his size, but he'd never mentioned it. Probably because he was such a stoic and silent person by nature. I think his idea of fun is sitting in the corner glaring at everyone who is actually having fun. If he ever cracks a real smile â€" not one of the fake ones he slaps on when I tell him to look approachable â€" I swear I'll have a heart attack.

Ranger slid back into the booth and wrapped his arm around me, pulling me close so that there was barely enough room to wedge a playing card between us. Lester poured me a tall glass of cool, amber liquid. Bobby informed me that they'd already ordered for me (as per usual). And Tank sat silently in the corner. Glaring. Now that I think about it, he probably has Resting Bitch Face. Poor guy.

Dinner progressed as it usually did. Lester gave me shit about my failed attempts both on the mats and in the field. Bobby asked after injuries I had sustained during the week â€" a bump on the head, and two skinned knees. We all discussed general life stuff. Ranger made a few uncharacteristic jokes. And Tank grunted a time or two when he was addressed. I was on my third slice of blissfully greasy pizza when something atypical happened.

Ranger's phone rang.

Usually he made it clear that he was offline during our weekly dinners. So unless it was an absolute emergency. Or it was his family. He was out of contact.

"Manoso," he stated tersely by way of greeting. The first sign that

the person on the other end was neither family nor Rangeman. That left one option: The Government. "When?" He slowly removed his arm from around me, leaning both elbows on the table. "I'll be there." And he hung up, shoving his phone away once more.

"Well?" I asked.

"My presence is requested for a series of important meetings in DC," he explained quietly.

"When?"

"Tomorrow morning."

I stared directly into his eyes, trying to get as much information from them as I could without speaking. His eyes were usually the best gauge of what was really up. I couldn't find anything that spelled out danger, but that didn't mean much. He'd hidden it from me before. "Just meetings?" I clarified.

"Just meetings," he agreed.

"Promise you won't die."

If he was an eye roller, he definitely would have rolled his eyes at my demand. Instead, he let out a teeny tiny sigh and said, "It's just meetings."

I crossed my arms over my chest and would have turned to face him head on, if it weren't for Tank taking up forty-five percent of the seat, squeezing me between him and my boyfriend. "Promise me," I insisted.

"Alright," he said, manoeuvring so he could hold both sides of my face, staring straight into my baby blues. "I promise. But Babe, you should know, I'd rather die tomorrow than live a hundred years without knowing you."

I was utterly speechless, a phenomenon that happened almost never. That was absolutely the most romantic thing he'd ever said to me. Ever. All I could stare. Eyes wide. Hoping I wouldn't embarrass myself by crying or something ridiculous like that. I was not an emotional cry baby. I wasn't!

Thankfully, I was distracted by the men on the opposite side of the table. They'd gasped at Ranger's words "probably, I did too" and were now holding a conversations in hurried, stage whispers.

"Did he just "?" Lester hissed to Bobby.

"I think he did," Bobby confirmed.

"Pocahontas," they both breathed.

I saw Lester shake his head out of the corner of my eye. "When did he watch it?"

"\_Why\_ would he ever watch it?" Bobby countered.

"Maybe Julie - ?" Lester started to suggest, but Ranger had had enough of them.

"Pipe down," he commanded. "Or I'll paint with all the colours of your blood."

I'd barely managed to hide my smirk behind my hand when a realisation occurred to me. "Wait," I exclaimed, perhaps a little too loudly. "How do \_you guys\_ know Pocahontas." I was barely all that familiar with the movie. I'd watched it perhaps a couple times when I was a child, but that was it.

Ranger shook his head beside me. "Babe, why do you always ask the loaded questions?"

I didn't have a chance to answer, nor did I receive a real answer to my own question before Lester was bouncing on his seat like an excited puppy on a trip to the dog park. "If the Boss Man is going away for the weekend you should come away with us to the Beach House."

My ears pricked up at the word beach. I was always up for some beach time. "Beach house?" I asked, trying to keep the hope and curiosity out of my voice.

"A bunch of the guys own a beach house together," Ranger explained. "Every now and then they take the weekend off and gather there for some down time."

"And that weekend is this weekend," Bobby clarified. "So are you coming?"

Suddenly, I wasn't so sure. I hang out with the guys all the time, so it shouldn't be that big a deal. But then I realised that the time I spent with them was always in short bursts and anything longer was usually accompanied by Ranger. Ranger wouldn't be there this time. He \_couldn't\_ be there this time. It would be just me and the guys. I was comfortable enough with Lester and Bobby and Tank when he was being personable, but with everyone? "Oh, um," I said. "I don't know if-"

"You should go, Babe," Ranger urged, not bothering to hide his smirk. "You'll enjoy it."

"Fine," I agreed. "I'll go. At the very least it'll give me something to do other than sit at home alone." I paused, eyeing them each individually. "So what exactly happens on these guys' weekends?"

"You'll see," Lester grinned.

\*o\*

\_"Hakuna Matata! It's a wonderful phrase! Hakuna Matata! It's no passing craze! It means no-\_"

I slammed the door shut, unable to move any more than that as the image of the men sprawled through the large living area of the house singing along to Disney's \_The Lion King\_ burned into my retinas. I could still hear them, even with the door shut. It was loud. It was

terrifying. It wasâ€¦ I don't know what it was.

"Is this real?" I asked, staring at the door.

"Yep," Tank said from directly behind me. He sounded about as thrilled about it as I was shocked.

"Are they drunk?"

"Nope." Bobby this time.

"But they'reâ€¦" I couldn't quite figure out how to phrase it. I'd never encountered anything like this before. Growing up, all I ever saw my father and his friends doing was sitting in lawn chairs in the backyard, sitting on the sofa watching the game, and playing poker on the dining room table. Singing along to Disney movies was not on my list of things grown, ex-military men did. Shooting? Yes. Intimidating? Yes. Beating people to a pulp? Yes. Clubbing? Yes. Drinking? Yes. Singing? Not so much.

"Happy?" Lester tried to finish my sentence for me.

"Relaxed?" Bobby suggested.

"Insane?" Tank drawled.

"Tuneful," I said slowly, frowning as I finally turned to face them.

Lester scoffed, picking up the overnight bag I'd dropped at the sight and sound of the men and slinging it over his shoulder. "Of course they are," he said. "If they weren't Zip would have a fit."

"This is what you do with your weekends off?" I asked, still struggling to grasp the reality that was the dozen or so burly men singing. Disney. Enthusiastically. Like they were five.

Lester nodded, grinning happily as he bounced on his toes. Sometimes he really was just like a puppy. "Pretty much."

The singing ended and I found myself glancing over my shoulder at the closed door. "Does, uh, Ranger know?"

"Oh yeah." Bobby was rocking back and forth on his heels, hands in pockets. To be honest he looked quite pleased with himself.

"Does he ever join in?"

Tank gave me a single raised eyebrow, like he was contemplating my level of sanity. "Nope," he stated.

The men inside laughed, and apparently that was enough for Lester to break. "We should get in there," he announced, nudging me aside so he could open the door once more. The moment it was wide enough he was inside, my bag was dropped on a counter and he took a running leap at the couch, landing snuggly between Cal and Junior. I didn't move, but Tank squeezed past me, sauntering in like there weren't a bunch of his work colleagues acting like preteen girls.

Bobby paused beside me. "You coming?"

"In a minute," I assured him, stepping back from the door to allow him to pass. "You go ahead, I just need to check on something." He nodded and entered, leaving the door open. Probably so he could keep an eye on me, and so it wouldn't be an obstacle if I suddenly decided to run for it. I didn't think I would run, but the men were always one step ahead of me, just in case. I turned away and pulled out my phone, dialling Ranger without thinking. He was probably in meetings still. He'd left for DC early this morning, leaving me to muddle through my usual Friday of training, skip tracing and dinner at my parents before Tank, Bobby and Lester came to drag me out to the shore.

I'd thought this would be a typical bloke weekend. Drinking. Poker. Maybe some random hook-ups that I could ignore. But Disney Sing Alongs?

"Babe?" Ranger's voice came through the phone pressed to my ear.

"Ranger!" I exclaimed, slightly startled. "I thought you'd still be in meetings."

"Then why did you call?" he asked.

I peered around the doorway at the men, laughing and smiling and generally being everything I'd never seen in such large quantities from them. "I, uh, needed to talk to you."

"Exactly," he agreed. "So I answered. What's up?"

"Why didn't you warn me?"

"And ruin the surprise?" He laughed. He was enjoying himself.

I was not. "Surprise?!" I demanded. "You call this a surprise?"

"Shock then?" Ranger amended. "I have to admit, I wish I was there to see your face. Were they singing when you arrived? I hope they were singing."

My hands were shaking as I clenched them by my sides. I'd thought we were past the point of me being his entertainment, but here he was, deliberately putting me in a compromising position, just so he could be amused by my reactions. "Yes," I seethed. "They were singing. Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"Babe," he said, attempting to calm me down by using his pet name for me. "It's not mine to tell. You should go join in."

"But-"

"Go!" he urged, laughing again. "You'll have fun! Make sure you get video of Tank's big moment."

"Tank?" I asked confused. "What? But- Ranger!"

He let out what sounded like a sigh. "Love you, Babe. I have to get back. Don't make me text Tank to come drag you inside."

"Fine!" I exclaimed, throwing up my hands in frustration even though he couldn't see me. "I'm going in. But I'm \_not\_ singing."

\_\*\*Thoughts? You know I love hearing from you.\*\*\_

End  
file.